Psychoanalyzing the Post-Apocalypse

Psychoanalytic Approaches to 21st Century Fiction and Film

Edited by
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Series in Critical Media Studies



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Psychoanalyzing the Post-Apocalypse *offers a rigorous, much-needed complement to media-theoretical interpretations of catastrophe fiction, revealing how trauma, repetition, and the death drive lie at the heart of our most enduring narratives of collapse. Gürova has assembled a genuinely interdisciplinary volume that brings Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian perspectives into dialogue across literature, film, and television. It will be essential reading for scholars of the post-apocalyptic imagination.*

Dr. Víctor González Guzmán
Open University of Catalonia, Spain

This timely book explores the intricate relationship between post-apocalyptic fiction and psychoanalysis. Drawing on literary and screen narratives, it demonstrates how speculative storytelling across diverse media generates rich psychoanalytic possibilities and novel perspectives on trauma, memory, desire, and loss. An insightful and engaging read.

Dr. Emrah Atasoy
IASH, University of Edinburg, UK

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This volume is dedicated to all who navigate imagined and ruined worlds—scholars, writers, and readers alike—who confront the shadows of collapse, illuminate the complexities of the human psyche, and in doing so, uncover the possibilities of renewal, transformation, and new beginnings.

Introduction

The post-apocalyptic imagination has become one of the most significant cultural formations of the twenty-first century. Across contemporary literature, film, and television, narratives of ecological collapse, pandemic devastation, technological domination, nuclear catastrophe, and societal disintegration have proliferated with remarkable intensity. The popularity of these narratives is not merely a response to contemporary crises; it also reflects a deeper cultural need to imagine the breakdown of the symbolic structures that organize everyday life. Post-apocalyptic texts repeatedly ask what remains when institutions fail, social bonds fracture, and inherited systems of meaning lose their authority. They therefore direct attention not only to the material consequences of catastrophe but also to its psychological, affective, and existential dimensions. If apocalypse traditionally concerns the end of a world, post-apocalyptic narratives are fundamentally concerned with what happens to subjects after that ending has occurred—or, more precisely, after they discover that endings are rarely final and that psychic life continues amid ruins.

Psychoanalysis offers a particularly productive framework for understanding this cultural fascination with catastrophe because it has always been concerned with forms of experience that resist conscious mastery. From Freud's investigations of trauma, repression, and repetition to Lacan's theories of desire, fantasy, and the Real, psychoanalytic thought provides conceptual tools for examining the relationship between external crisis and internal psychic life. Yet the post-apocalyptic imagination is not simply a repository of fears and anxieties waiting to be decoded through psychoanalytic interpretation. Rather, these narratives frequently stage the very processes that psychoanalysis seeks to understand: the return of repressed histories, the persistence of traumatic memory, the repetition of destructive patterns, the restructuring of identity after loss, and the search for meaning in the aftermath of symbolic collapse. Post-apocalyptic fiction and film thus occupy a privileged position within contemporary culture because they transform abstract psychological processes into narrative, visual, and symbolic forms.

At the same time, psychoanalysis is not a unified theoretical tradition. One of the guiding principles of this volume is the recognition that different psychoanalytic schools illuminate different aspects of post-apocalyptic representation. Several chapters draw primarily upon Freudian and Lacanian concepts, including trauma, repetition compulsion, the death drive, desire, fantasy, and the encounter with the Real. These essays examine how catastrophic worlds expose the persistence of unconscious conflicts that survive even after social structures have collapsed. Other contributions engage post-Lacanian

developments that focus on mourning, memory, ethical responsibility, and the subject's relation to loss. Such approaches shift attention away from desire alone and toward questions of grief, survival, and the reconstruction of meaning following collective catastrophe. A third group of chapters employs Jungian psychoanalysis, investigating archetypes, individuation, symbolic transformation, and mythic renewal. Although these traditions differ in important ways—sometimes even contradicting one another—they share a concern with how subjects negotiate psychic crisis and transformation. The diversity of psychoanalytic approaches represented in this collection is therefore not a weakness but a strength, reflecting the complexity of post-apocalyptic narratives themselves.

Indeed, the essays gathered here are united less by allegiance to a single psychoanalytic paradigm than by a shared concern with several recurring questions. How do subjects respond to trauma when familiar social frameworks disappear? Why do post-apocalyptic narratives so frequently return to cycles of destruction and repetition? What forms of desire persist after the collapse of civilization? How do individuals and communities mourn the loss of worlds, identities, and futures? Under what conditions might psychic transformation, individuation, or renewal become possible? Across the volume, trauma, desire, mourning, memory, fantasy, survival, and transformation emerge as interconnected rather than discrete concerns. The post-apocalypse becomes a privileged narrative space in which these psychic processes are intensified, exposed, and rendered visible.

The volume also seeks to address an important methodological question concerning medium. Psychoanalytic criticism has historically developed in close dialogue with literature, yet many of the most influential post-apocalyptic narratives of the twenty-first century circulate through film and television. Literature and visual media undoubtedly share an interest in representing unconscious life, but they do so through different formal mechanisms. Literary texts often provide access to memory, interiority, narration, and subjective reflection, allowing readers to encounter psychic conflict through language itself. Film and television, by contrast, mobilize visual spectacle, sound, performance, editing, and affective immersion to produce experiences that may exceed verbal articulation. A devastated landscape, a recurring visual motif, or a moment of cinematic excess can function as powerfully as narrative discourse in communicating trauma, desire, fantasy, or loss. The inclusion of literature, film, and television in this volume therefore reflects a commitment to exploring how different media generate distinct psychoanalytic possibilities while remaining connected through shared thematic concerns.

Such an approach also invites a reconsideration of the relationship between psychoanalysis and art itself. Psychoanalytic criticism is often understood as a

method for uncovering latent meanings hidden within cultural texts. Yet the relationship is reciprocal. Literature, film, and television do not merely illustrate psychoanalytic concepts; they frequently extend, challenge, and reconfigure them. Artistic works provide imaginative laboratories in which unconscious processes can be staged, visualized, and explored in ways that theoretical discourse alone cannot achieve. Post-apocalyptic narratives are particularly valuable in this regard because they create extreme situations in which fundamental psychic structures become newly visible. By depicting worlds stripped of familiar certainties, they reveal how subjects negotiate trauma, desire, grief, memory, identity, and transformation under conditions of radical instability. Art thus contributes to psychoanalytic thinking by offering new configurations of psychic life, while psychoanalysis provides a vocabulary for understanding why these configurations continue to resonate so powerfully in contemporary culture.

Psychoanalyzing the Post-Apocalypse: Psychoanalytic Approaches to 21st-Century Fiction and Film emerges from these theoretical concerns. Bringing together scholars working across literary studies, film studies, psychoanalytic theory, and cultural criticism, the volume examines how post-apocalyptic narratives function as sites where individual psychology and collective crisis intersect. Whether focused on alien invasion, ecological devastation, nuclear aftermath, environmental disaster, genetic engineering, or inexplicable disappearance, the texts examined here reveal catastrophe to be not merely a material event but a psychological and cultural condition. Collectively, the essays demonstrate that the post-apocalypse remains one of the most revealing imaginative frameworks through which contemporary culture confronts its fears, desires, losses, and possibilities for renewal.

The opening chapters of the volume are primarily concerned with the relationship between trauma, repetition, and survival. In the first chapter, Emrah Peksoy examines Douglas Niles's *War of the Worlds: New Millennium* (2005) through the combined frameworks of Freudian psychoanalysis and contemporary trauma theory. The chapter argues that the novel transforms Wells's invasion narrative into a meditation on the temporal and psychological afterlives of catastrophe. Drawing on Freud's concept of the death drive alongside Cathy Caruth's understanding of traumatic repetition, Emrah Peksoy demonstrates how the text's fragmented narrative structure, compulsive returns to moments of crisis, and recurring scenes of communication enact the belated nature of traumatic experience. Rather than presenting survival as a straightforward triumph over destruction, the novel reveals how survival itself becomes entangled with repetition, memory, and psychic rupture. In this reading, the Martian invasion functions not merely as an external threat but as a catalyst

that exposes the fragile relationship between trauma, testimony, and ethical responsibility.

Questions of repetition and self-destruction remain central in the following chapter, where Parvin Sultana investigates Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) through Freud's death drive and Lacan's concept of *object petit a*. The chapter contends that Winterson's cyclical narrative structure exposes a persistent human investment in catastrophe itself. Through its recurring worlds, repeated apocalypses, and endlessly deferred promises of renewal, the novel dramatizes a collective compulsion toward self-destruction that transcends individual psychology and assumes civilizational dimensions. Particular attention is given to Billie Crusoe's shifting identities, her relationship with Spike, and the ideological machinery of MORE, all of which reveal how desire repeatedly attaches itself to fantasies that perpetuate the very conditions of destruction they appear to oppose. By reading Planet Blue as a Lacanian object-cause of desire, the chapter argues that the novel dismantles fantasies of escape and rebirth, exposing apocalypse as an endlessly recurring symptom rather than a transformative endpoint.

If the first two chapters explore the destructive dimensions of repetition, the third chapter turns to the possibility of psychic endurance and symbolic repair. Focusing on Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) and Tsukumizu's *Girls' Last Tour* (2014–2018; anime adaptation 2017), Kendra Sheehan examines how artistic creation functions as a mechanism of survival in post-apocalyptic worlds. Drawing on Freud's theory of sublimation and Winnicott's concept of transitional objects, the chapter argues that acts of performance, storytelling, drawing, collecting, and remembrance enable subjects to preserve continuity in the aftermath of civilizational collapse. Bringing these psychoanalytic concepts into dialogue with Japanese aesthetic traditions such as mujo and mono no aware, the analysis demonstrates how both texts construct art not as an escape from loss but as a means of inhabiting loss productively. The chapter ultimately suggests that creativity emerges as one of the most significant forms of psychic resilience available in worlds where traditional social structures have disappeared.

The volume then shifts from literary narratives to cinematic representations of trauma and transformation. In the fourth chapter, Luboš Ptáček analyzes *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* (2024) through an interdisciplinary psychoanalytic framework that combines Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian perspectives. The chapter argues that the wasteland of the Mad Max universe operates as an externalized psychic landscape in which questions of trauma, desire, power, and rebirth are staged with unusual intensity. Furiosa's journey is interpreted simultaneously as a traumatic return, a confrontation with loss, and a process of individuation, while figures such as Immortan Joe embody pathological forms of repetition, domination, and symbolic control.

Through close attention to the films' visual symbolism, bodily imagery, and mythic structures, the chapter demonstrates how the Mad Max franchise transforms spectacular action cinema into a sustained exploration of psychic survival, collective resistance, and the possibility of renewal after catastrophe.

Questions of fantasy and denial occupy the center of the following chapter, where Andrew Kirby offers a Lacanian reading of Roland Emmerich's *2012* (2009). Rather than interpreting the film simply as a disaster spectacle, the chapter investigates how it manages the anxiety generated by ecological catastrophe. Drawing on Lacan's triadic model of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, the analysis argues that the film repeatedly stages encounters with environmental destruction only to neutralize their traumatic implications through narratives of technological mastery, heroic action, and human exceptionalism. In doing so, the film transforms ecological crisis into a reassuring fantasy of survival that conceals the radical contingency and unpredictability of the natural world. The chapter therefore positions *2012* as an example of how popular cinema can simultaneously acknowledge and disavow the Real of environmental collapse.

The next three chapters move increasingly toward questions of archetype, transformation, and psychic reconstruction. In the sixth chapter, Henriata Krupa examines Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) through the figure of the trickster, bringing together Jungian archetypal criticism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and feminist theory. The chapter argues that the novel's principal characters—Crake, Oryx, and Jimmy/Snowman—embody distinct manifestations of trickster energy that destabilize established categories of identity, morality, and meaning. Through their interactions, Atwood's narrative exposes the unstable boundaries between creation and destruction, progress and catastrophe, humanity and posthumanity. By positioning the trickster as a disruptive yet generative force, the chapter demonstrates how the novel imagines survival not through stability but through ongoing processes of transformation and uncertainty.

A related concern with transformation informs the seventh chapter, in which Barbara Gabriella Renzi reads *Vesper* (2022) as a cinematic representation of Jungian individuation. Set within a devastated ecological landscape dominated by technological oligarchies, the film depicts the formation of subjectivity amid conditions of radical instability. The chapter interprets *Vesper*'s journey as an archetypal quest involving encounters with shadow figures, anima projections, and symbolic forms of death and rebirth. Particular emphasis is placed on her relationship with Camellia and on the symbolic significance of the film's genetically engineered seeds, which become emblems of psychic as well as ecological regeneration. Through a Jungian lens, the chapter argues that *Vesper*

reimagines post-apocalyptic survival as a process of integration in which personal transformation becomes inseparable from collective renewal.

The eighth chapter continues this engagement with Jungian psychology through a reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Eira H. Betthell interprets the novel's devastated landscape as the external manifestation of psychic fragmentation, transforming the post-apocalyptic journey into a symbolic descent into the unconscious. Within this framework, the father and son emerge as complementary archetypal figures: the father embodies a wounded and increasingly exhausted ego struggling to maintain order, while the son represents an emergent Self capable of sustaining empathy, ethical responsibility, and hope. By tracing the novel's imagery of descent, loss, shadow confrontation, and renewal, the chapter demonstrates how McCarthy's narrative transforms apocalypse into a meditation on moral survival and the difficult reconstruction of meaning after profound psychic rupture.

The volume concludes with a sustained examination of grief, mourning, and collective trauma. In the final chapter, Barbara Miceli explores both Tom Perrotta's *The Leftovers* (2011) and its television adaptation (2014–2017) as narratives of life after an incomprehensible loss. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, Massimo Recalcati's theories of mourning, Ricoeur's philosophy of memory, and insights from cognitive psychology, the chapter investigates how individuals and communities attempt to make sense of an event that resists explanation. Rather than treating the Sudden Departure as a mystery to be solved, the analysis focuses on its psychic consequences, particularly the ways in which grief, survivor's guilt, memory, and identity become intertwined. The chapter argues that *The Leftovers* offers one of the most compelling contemporary explorations of collective mourning, presenting catastrophe not as a singular event but as an ongoing process of negotiating absence, uncertainty, and the possibility of continuing life after loss.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume offer a comprehensive and interdisciplinary exploration of how psychoanalytic theory illuminates the psychological, social, and existential dimensions of post-apocalyptic fiction and film in the twenty-first century. By engaging with classical Freudian concepts, Lacanian theory, Jungian archetypes, and contemporary psychoanalytic developments, the essays demonstrate how these narratives negotiate trauma, desire, identity, and survival in worlds marked by collapse and uncertainty. This book seeks not only to map the diverse theoretical and media approaches to the post-apocalypse but also to stimulate new scholarly conversations about the ways in which these stories reflect and shape contemporary anxieties, pleasures, and possibilities for renewal. Ultimately, it positions post-apocalyptic fiction and film as rich sites for critical inquiry, offering readers fresh insights

into the human psyche and the enduring cultural fascination with life after catastrophe.

As editor, I am pleased to present this volume at a moment when interest in post-apocalyptic narratives is at an unprecedented height. My hope is that these essays will not only invite scholarly dialogue but also provoke broader conversations about the cultural significance of imagining the end and the possibility of beginning again. Through lenses of survival, trauma, identity, and social collapse, post-apocalyptic narratives continue to challenge, disturb, and inspire audiences, solidifying their place as vital sites of artistic and intellectual engagement.

Ultimately, the examination of these themes encourages critical reflection on the human condition, the fragility of civilization, and the potential for renewal in worlds irrevocably transformed by catastrophe. By illuminating how post-apocalyptic narratives both reflect and shape contemporary anxieties and aspirations, this volume aims to deepen our understanding of what it means to confront, endure, and reimagine life in a radically changed landscape.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all the contributors for their insightful and thought-provoking essays. Their rigorous analyses, creative readings, and diverse perspectives make this volume possible and enrich our understanding of post-apocalyptic fiction and film through psychoanalytic lenses. It is through their dedication and scholarship that this collection achieves its goal of offering both critical depth and interdisciplinary breadth, opening new avenues for exploring the psychological, cultural, and narrative dimensions of worlds after catastrophe.

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Editor

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Eira H. Betthell is a PhD candidate at the University of Essex, within the Department of Psychoanalytical and Psychosocial Studies. Her doctoral research is interdisciplinary in nature, with a focus on Jungian theory while drawing on alchemy, symbology, and myth as frameworks for understanding psychic transformation and cultural expression. Specializing in the study of war, art, and religion, she is particularly interested in the internal and external conditions involved in resilience and transformation. Her work blends psychological theory with cultural analysis, offering nuanced readings of narrative, ritual, and symbolic form. It bridges the psychological and the structural, offering insight into how transformation is (re)imagined, resisted, and enacted across diverse cultural terrains. Eira's academic background spans multiple disciplines and institutions. She previously studied at the University of Montana Western (USA), where she completed a BA (Hons) double-majoring in Social Science and Pre-Medicine. She went on to earn a BSc (Hons) in Logistics and Supply Chain Management at the University of Lincoln (UK), and an MA in War Studies at King's College London (UK). These diverse foundations inform her approach to depth psychology, enabling her to situate symbolic and psychoanalytic inquiry within broader cultural, strategic, and operational contexts.

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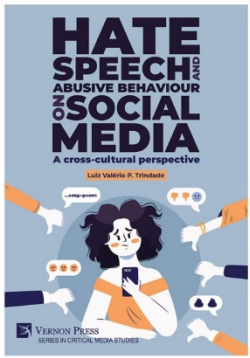
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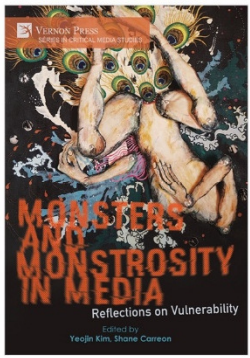
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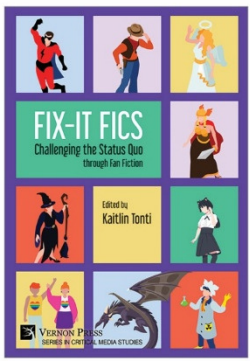
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